



POLARIZATION of America

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Pelican Bay Men's Club

Polarization in America

Agenda

Part 1. How Bad Is It?

- What do you think?
- What does the data say?

Part 2. What Damage is It Doing?

- Youth, Families, Communities, Institutions
- Political Damage
- Walking on Eggshells

Part 3. What's Causing It?

- Collapse in Trust
- Rise of the Extremes
- Media & Leadership

Part 4. What Doesn't Work

- Facts?
- Logic?
- Ridicule?

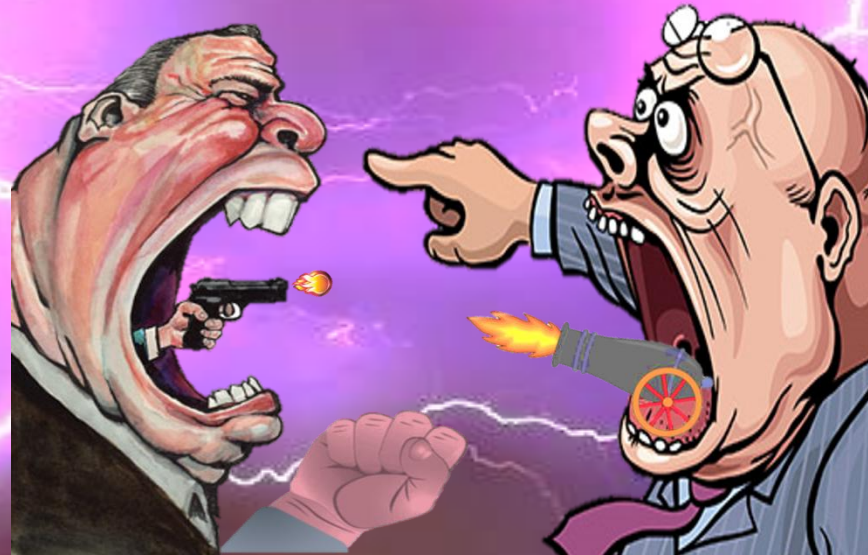
Part 5. What Can We Do About It

- Releasing Anger
- Listening and Creative Inquiry
- Rebuilding Trusting Relationships
- From Polarization to Paradox to Problem Solving
- Your everyday role as leaders



Part One

The Problem of Polarization





Have you had a somewhat volatile argument with a friend or family member about politics?

Do you have any grandchildren who have expressed deep concern about the future?

Do you have a sense of angst and uneasiness about the direction of America Today?





Signs of Polarization

- **Me vs You, Us vs Them Mentality:**
Me & Us (those who share their views) versus “you” or them” (those who do not). If you aren’t with me, you are my enemy.
- **Rigid Beliefs:**
Inflexible, unwavering beliefs; resist considering alternative viewpoints or new or contrarian information.
- **Refusal to Compromise:**
Unwilling to engage in compromise or negotiation, seeing it as a sign of weakness or betrayal of their principles.
- **Confirmation Bias:**
Actively seeking out and favoring information that confirms their existing beliefs while dismissing or downplaying contradictory information.
- **Hostile Communication:**
Aggressive or confrontational communication styles, including personal attacks and belligerent rhetoric directed at demeaning those with opposing views.
- **Propaganda & Demagoguery:**
Use of Media to divide people, exploit fears, scapegoat, and exacerbate victimization to excuse and promote irreverent leadership behavior.
- **Social Segregation:**
Social exclusion, where people primarily associate with others who share their views, leading to echo chambers and reinforcing their beliefs.
- **Demonization of Opponents:**
Dehumanizing or demonize those who hold opposing views, portraying them as morally corrupt, unintelligent, or dangerous.
- **Intolerance of Dissent:**
Little acceptance of disagreement, alternative thinking, or new ideas within polarized groups. Any internal dissent may be met with hostility or ostracism.
- **Emotional Reactions:**
Display strong emotional reactions when discussing the subject they are polarized about, such as anger, frustration, or anxiety.
- **Escalation of Conflict:**
Intensification of animosity using any resource that will over-power or undermine the opponent as people become more entrenched in their beliefs and less willing to find common ground.
- **Moral Slippage:**
Ethical Standards succumb to unethical behaviors, with justification that the Ends justifies the Means



Part 1. How Bad Is It?

What do you think?

What does the data say?



Why Polarization Now Feels Personal

72%

Hope to avoid politics at Family gatherings

Polarization is a daily-lived relational stressor, not only a public-policy divide.

39%

Feel stressed by the prospect of attending a social event

Polarization creates anxiety, silence, and community conflict in every generation

45%

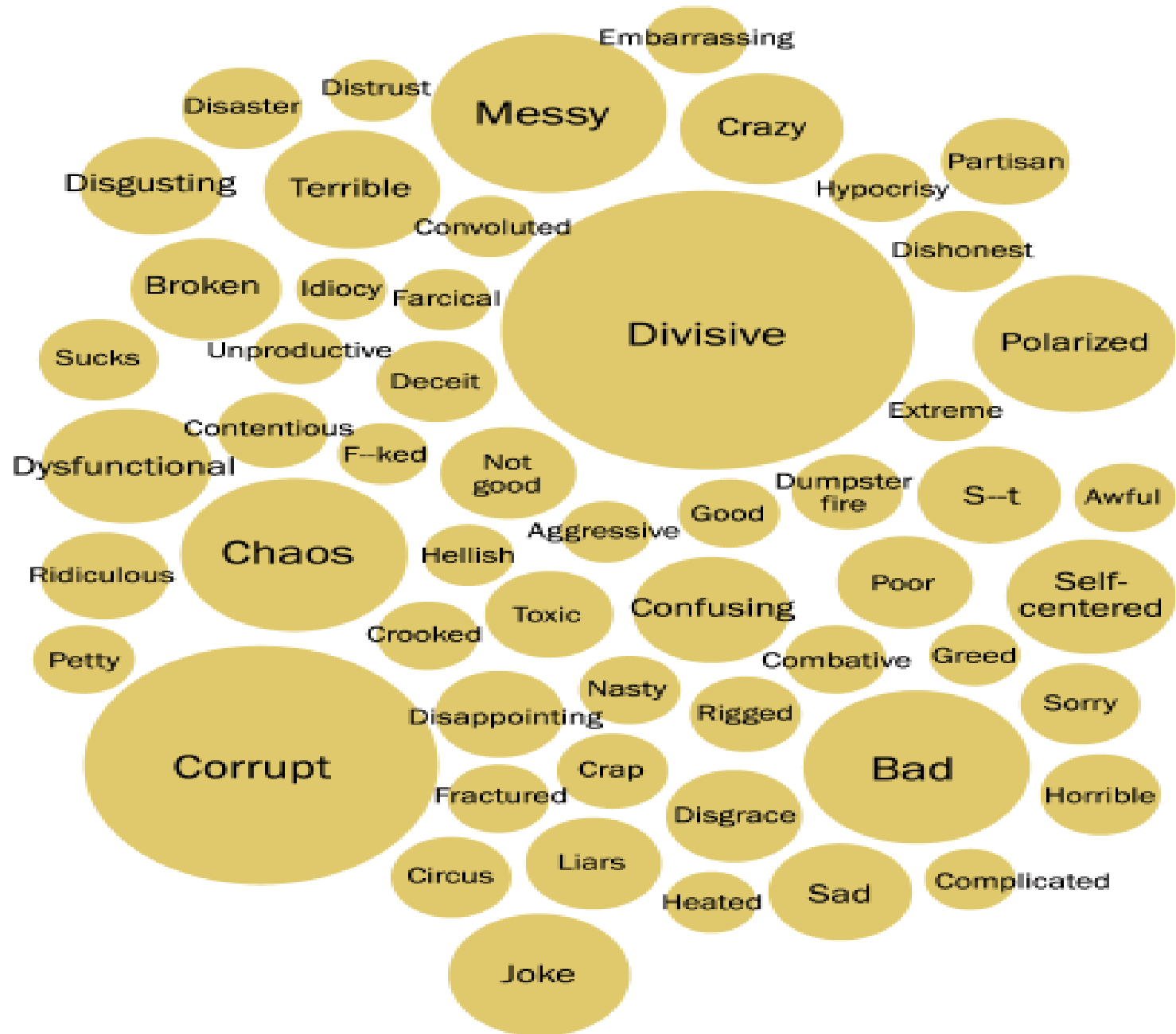
Of young adults skip gatherings to avoid conflict

Withdrawal becomes a coping strategy when conversations feel unsafe.

"You don't have to choose between silence and conflict. There is a better way."

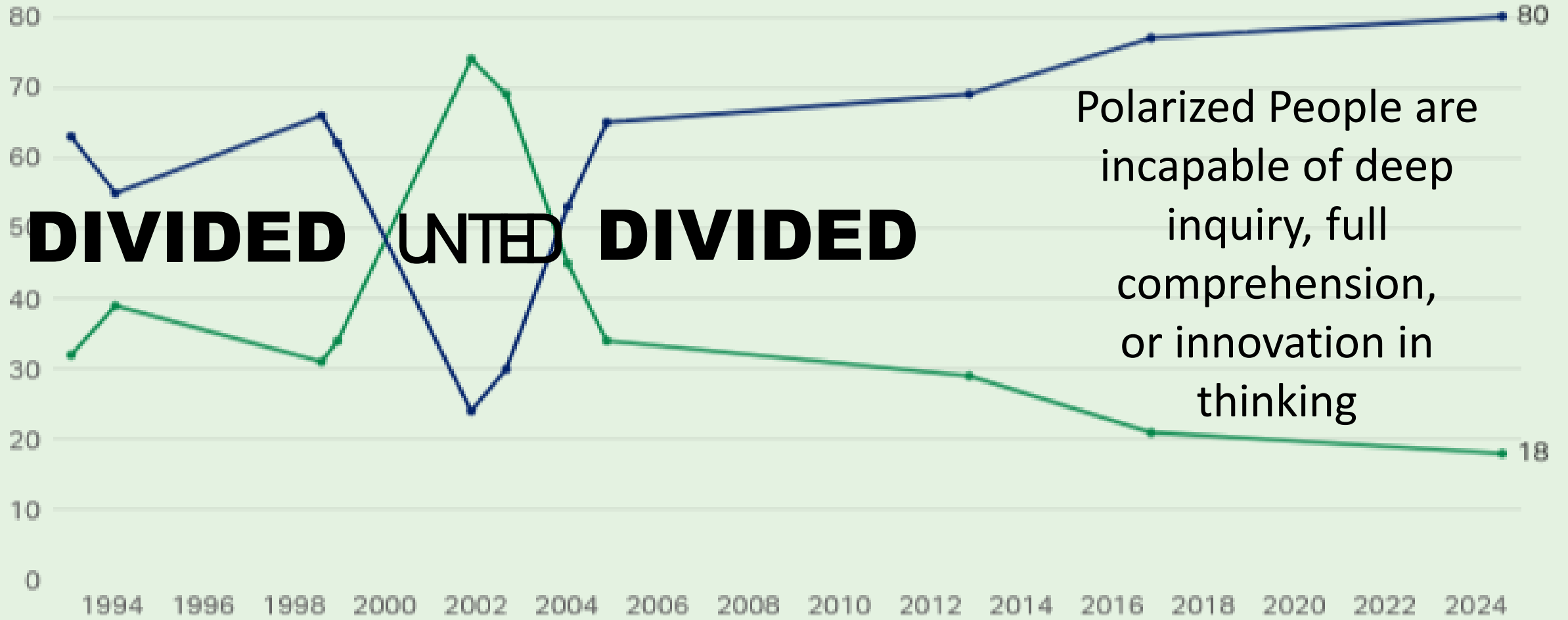
“Divisive,” “Corrupt,”
“Messy,” “Polarized,”
“Crazy” among the most
used words to describe
U.S. Politics today

*What one word or phrase would
you use to describe politics in
the U.S. these days?*



— % United and in agreement — % Greatly divided

Record-High 80% of Americans Perceive Nation as Divided



August 1998 results are from a Kaiser Family Foundation/Washington Post/Harvard University poll.

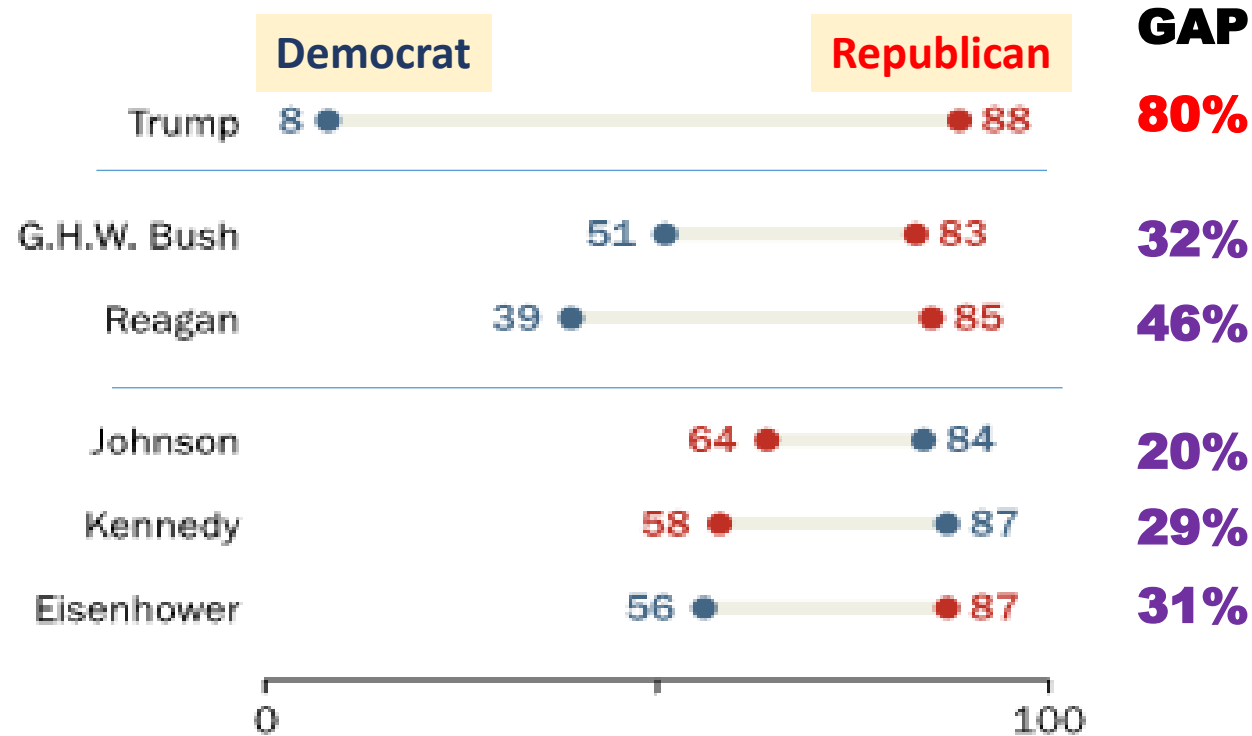
December 1998 results are from a Washington Post poll.

1993 and 1994 results are from the General Social Survey.

Source: Gallup Poll 2024

Wider Partisan Gap on President Trump's Job Rating than for any President in Six Decades

% approving of president's job during first year...



Notes: Based on Republicans and Democrats; does not include those who lean to a party. Trump first-year approval based on surveys conducted Feb.-June. Data from Eisenhower through George H.W. Bush from Gallup.

Source: Survey conducted June 8-18, 2017

PEW RESEARCH CENTER



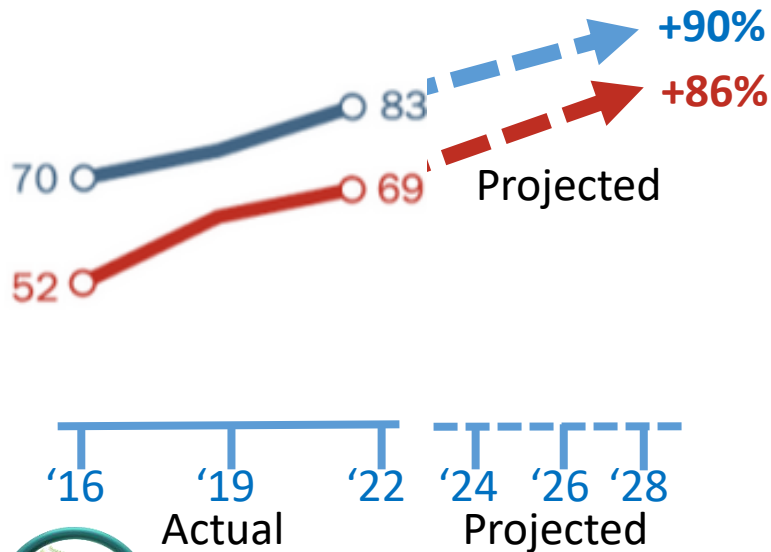
Polarization:
Growing
Shares of both
Republicans &
Democrats say
members of
the other
party are more
immoral,
dishonest,
close-minded
than other
Americans



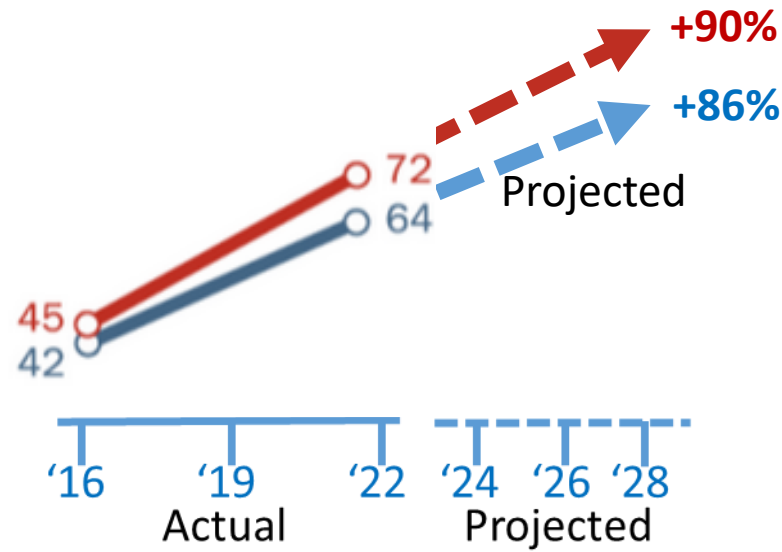
% who say members of the **other** party are a lot/somewhat more _____ compared to other Americans

- Republicans say Democrats are more ...
- Democrats say Republicans are more ...

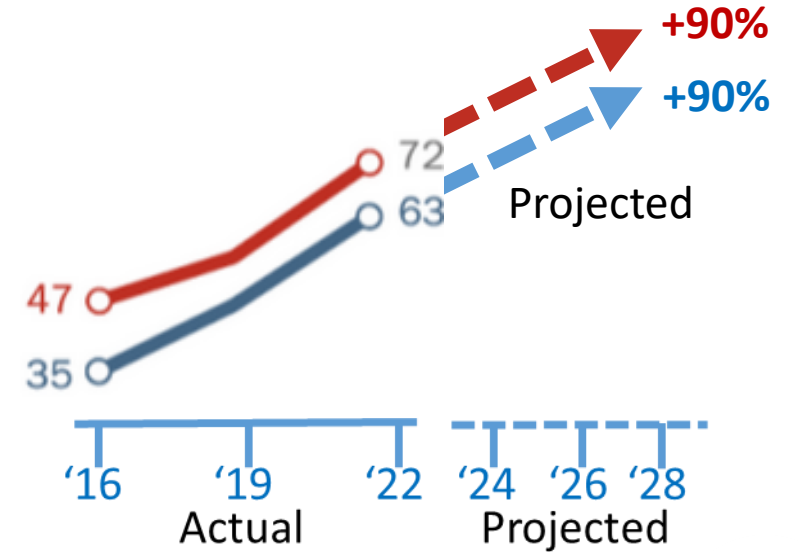
Close-Minded



Dishonest



Immoral



Source: Pew Research Center 2016, '19, '22

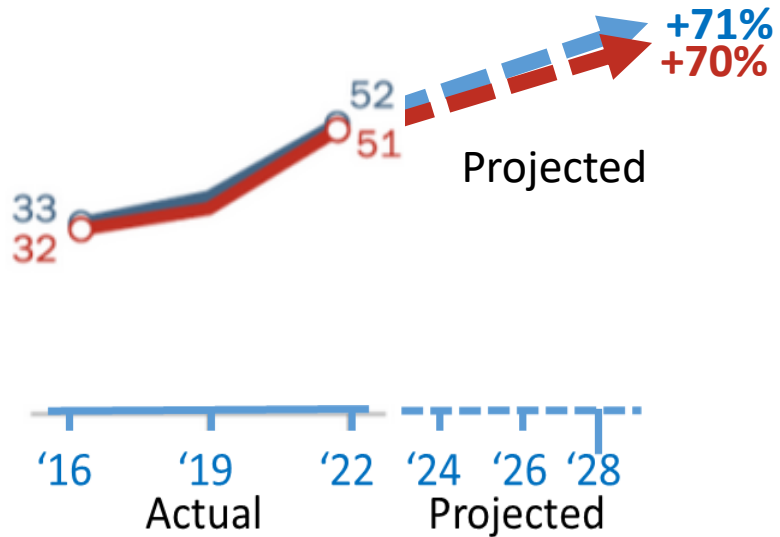
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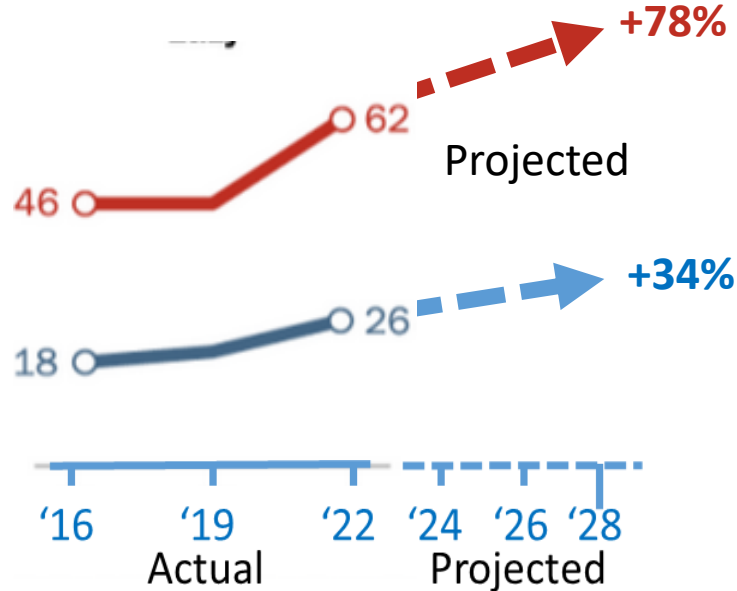
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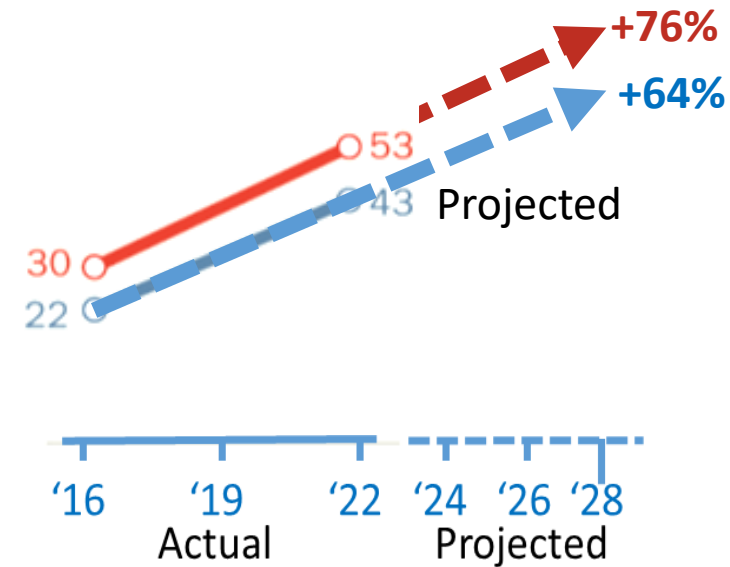
Unintelligent



Lazy



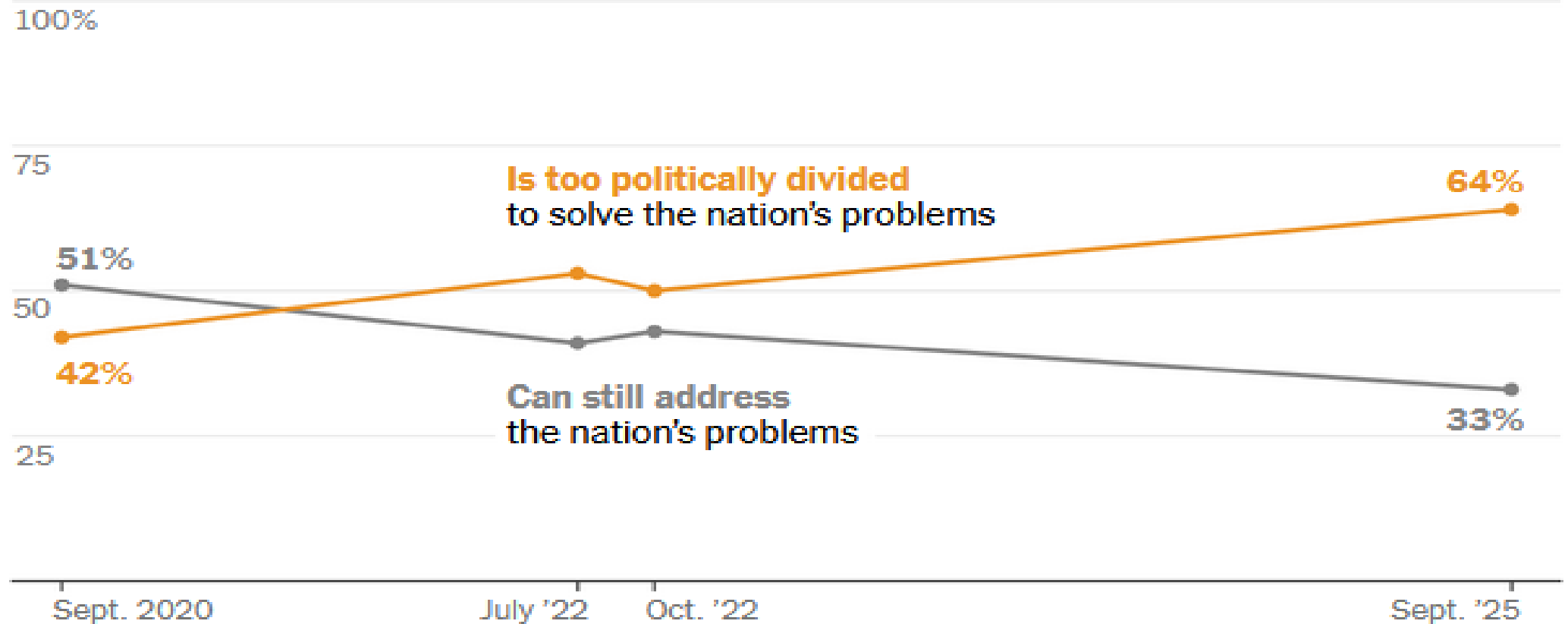
Say Four or All of these Traits



Most Voters Think America's Divisions Cannot Be Overcome

Voters think America's political system is too politically divided to solve the nation's problems

"There's no consensus on the facts, and when you can't have a conversation, how do you even move forward? Polarization has seeped into most aspects of my life, complicating running a business and even raising a family."



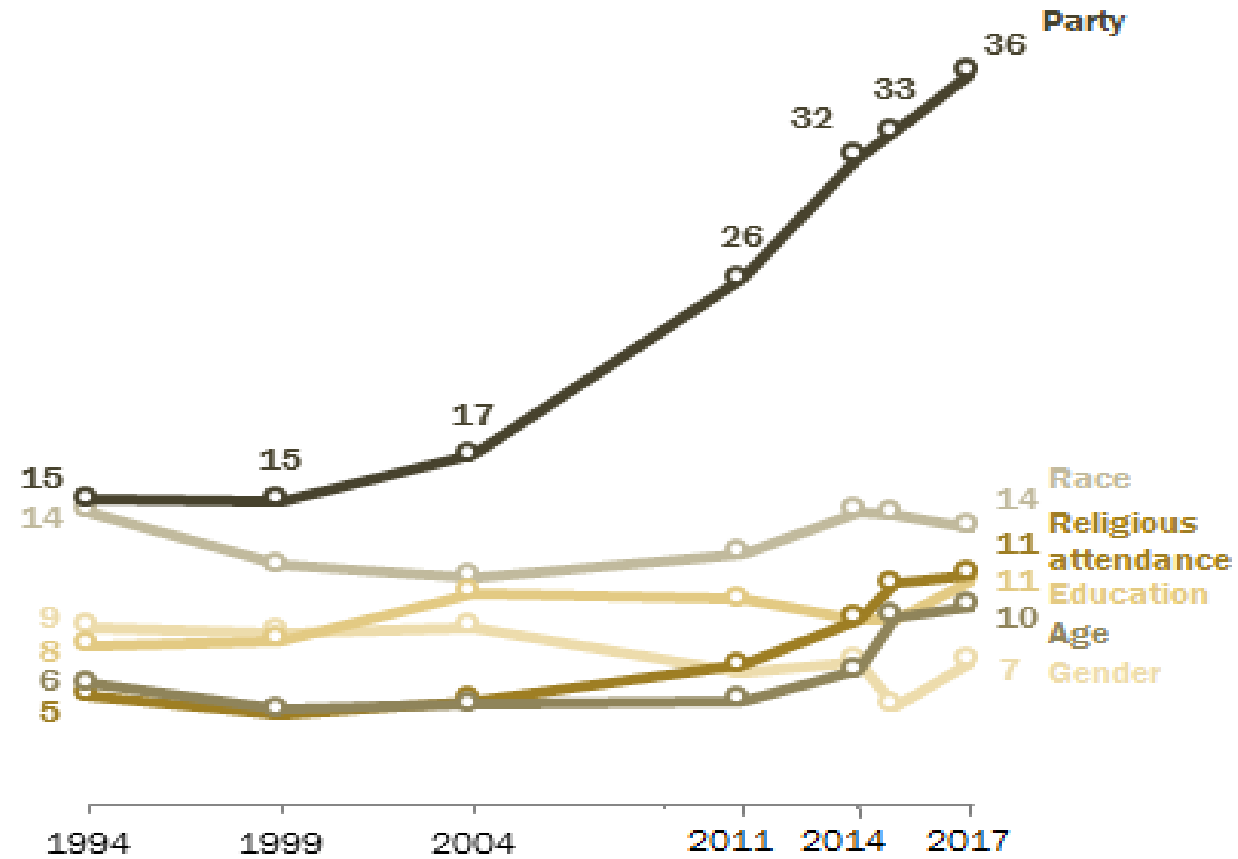
Based on New York Times/Siena polls of registered voters nationwide conducted Sept. 22-24, 2020, July 5-7, 2022, Oct. 9-12, 2022, and Sept. 22-27, 2025.
The share who said they didn't know or who did not respond is not shown.

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As partisan divides over political values widen, other gaps remain more modest

Average gap in the share taking a conservative position across 10 political values, by key demographics



Notes: Indicates average gap between the share of two groups taking the conservative position across 10 values items. Party=difference between Rep/Lean Rep and Dem/Lean Dem. Race=white non-Hispanic/black non-Hispanic. Education=college grad/non-college grad. Age=18-49/50+. Religion=weekly+ religious service attenders/less often.

Source: Survey conducted June 8-18 and June 27-July 9, 2017.

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Part 2. What Damage is It Doing?

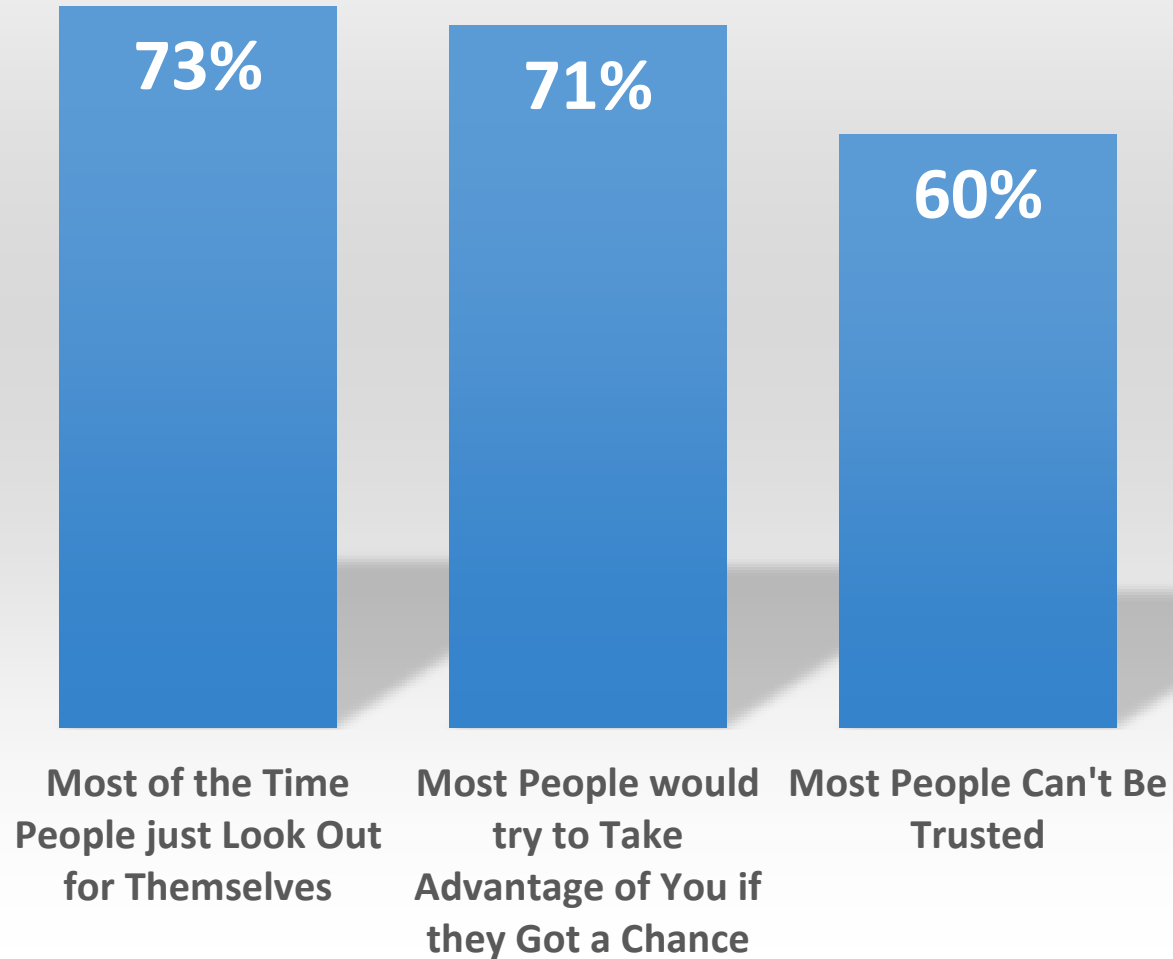
Youth, Families, Communities, Institutions

Walking on Eggshells -- Conformity



Most Young Adults in U.S. see others as Selfish, Exploitative, Untrustworthy -- % of U.S. Adults in each age group who say....

Ages ■ 18-29

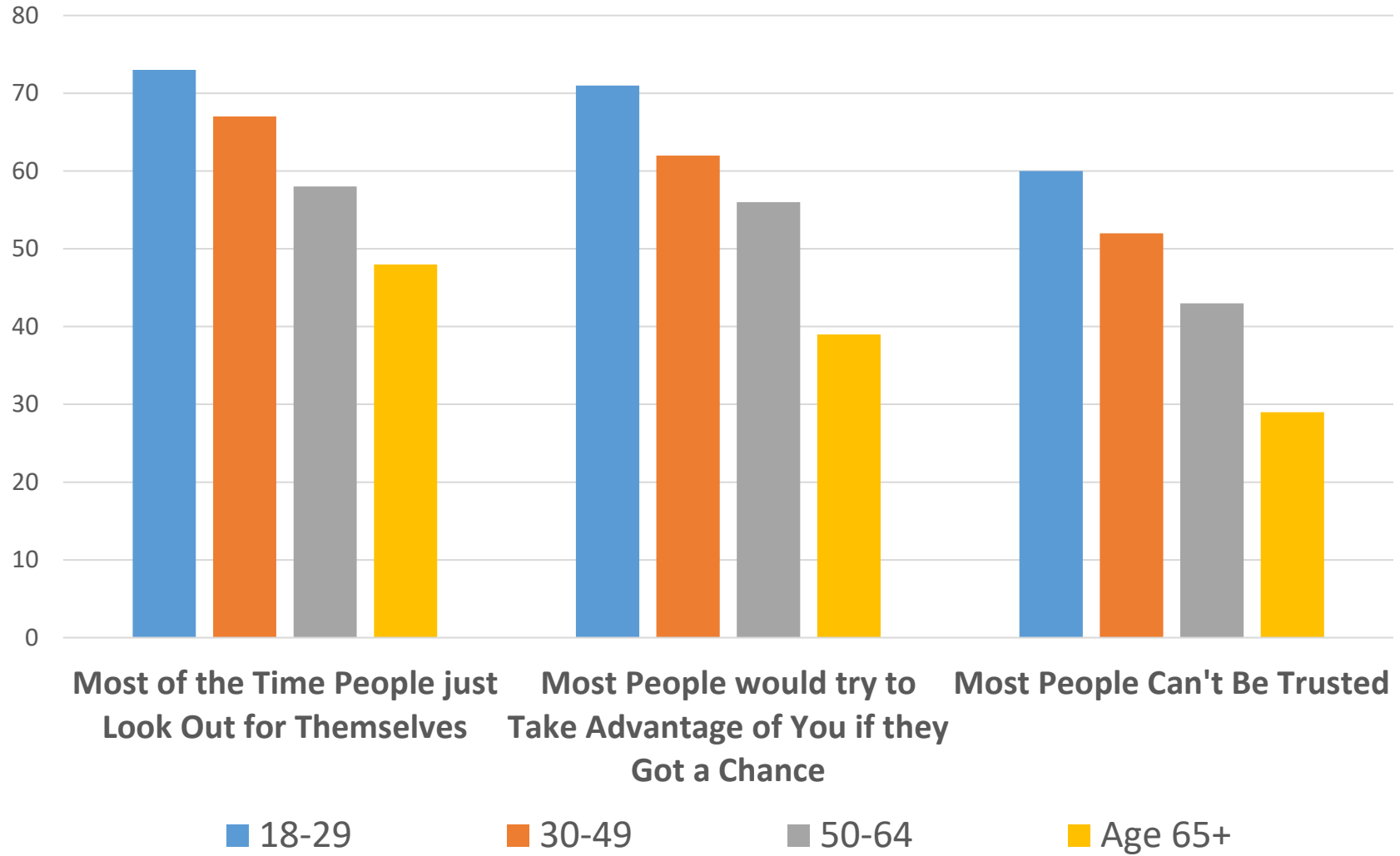


Source: Pew Research Center; Survey conducted Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018

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**Most Young Adults in U.S. see others as Selfish, Exploitative,
Untrustworthy -- % of U.S. Adults
in each age group who say....**



Source: Pew Research Center; Survey conducted Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018



Our Youth's CRISIS:



MENTAL HEALTH

- 44% of high school students feel "persistently sad or hopeless"
- 37% report poor mental health
- 22% seriously considered suicide
- 70% report anxiety and depression as major problems
- 61% report frequent loneliness
- 73% spend less time in face-to-face interaction than online

TRUST & DEMOCRACY COLLAPSE

- Only 7% of young people have "great deal" of trust in government
- 74% believe democracy is "in trouble" or "failing"
- 52% feel "politics has become too divisive to solve problems"
- 56% feel "American dream is no longer attainable"

ECONOMIC ANXIETY

- 63% of millennials living paycheck to paycheck
- Average student debt: \$37,000
- 48% can't afford home ownership
- 70% report financial stress affecting mental health
- 72% believe they'll be worse off than their parents

FUTURE CONCERNS

- 68% worry about climate change impacts
- 65% fear social/political instability
- 58% doubt they'll achieve retirement security
- 49% report having three or fewer close friends
- 39% feel they have "no one to talk to"

Source: Multiple Recent Surveys

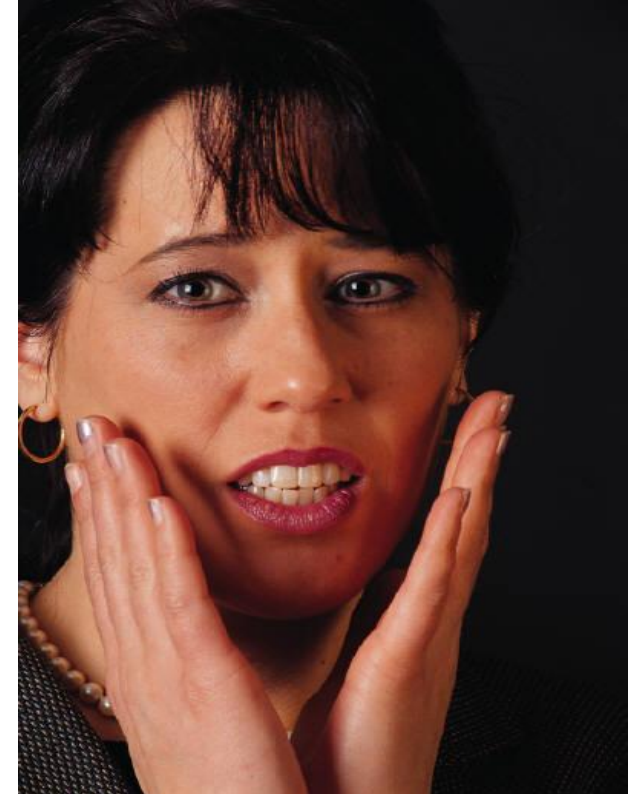
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What are the Implications & Consequences of Distrust & Polarization?

In Small Group Discussion:

- What would you predict in 2 years?
 - in 4 years?
- How does Polarization affect
 - Your Lives – friends, family, neighbors
 - Your business?
 - Your own attitude about life itself?
- How will the *Law of Unintended Consequence* strike?



Part 3. What's Causing It?

Institutional Collapse

Rise of the Extremes

Media & Leadership

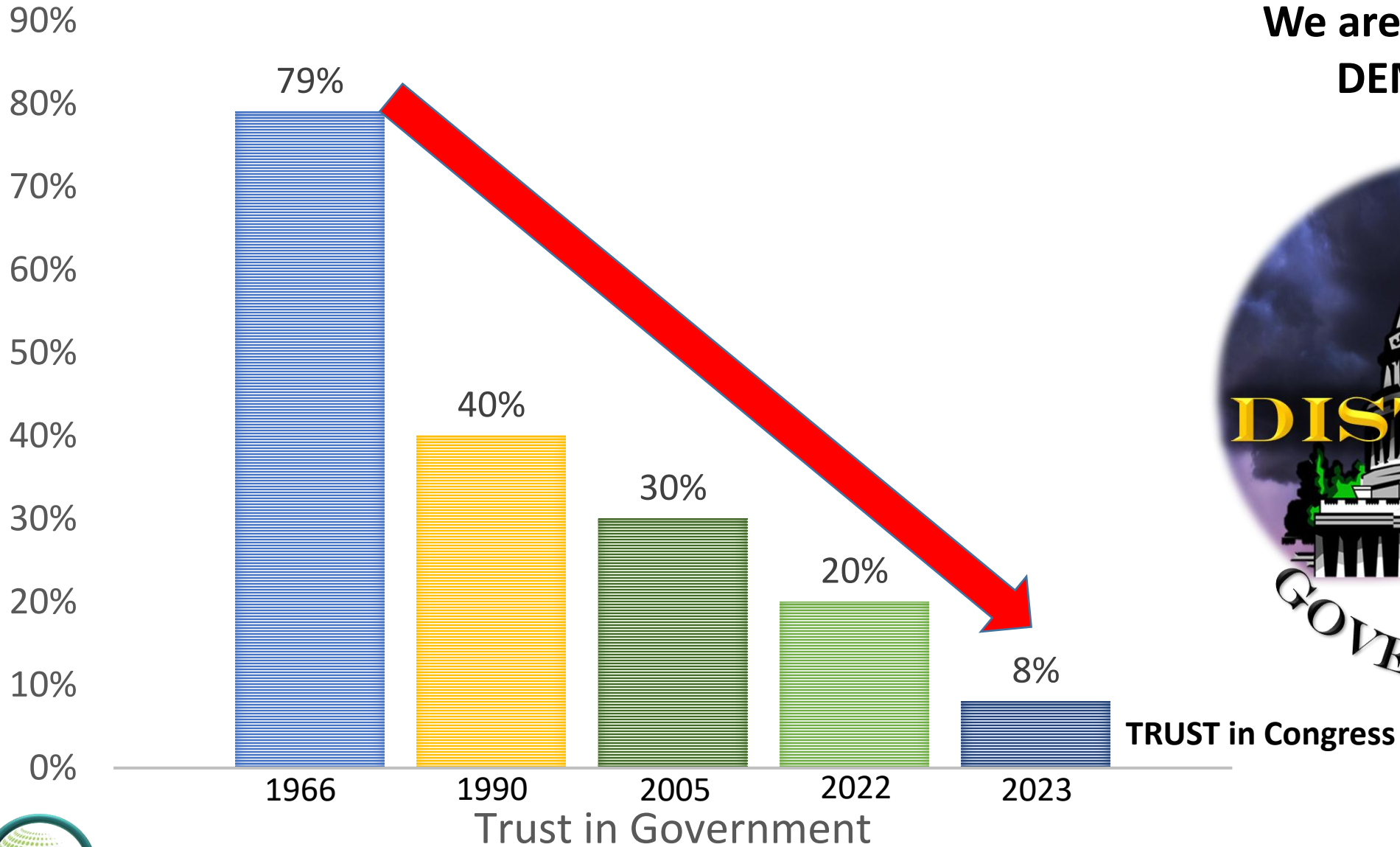




**If Distrust were a Disease
We'd declare a Pandemic**

THE STATE OF TRUST IN AMERICA

TRUST IN GOVERNMENT



**We are FAILING OUR
DEMOCRACY**



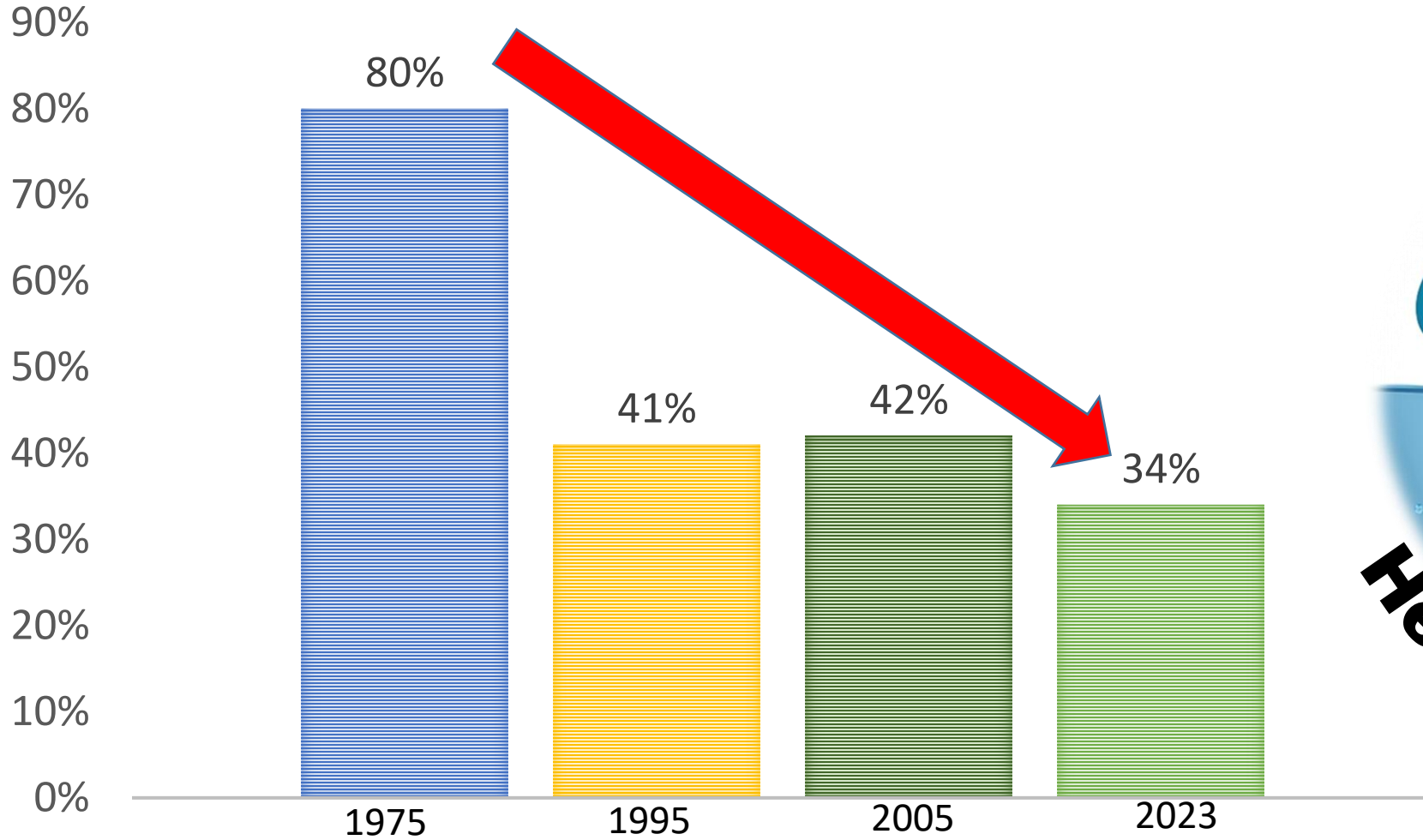
Source: Gallup Poll; Trust in Institutions 1975-2023

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TRUST IN HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

1975 1995 2005 2023



Trust in Healthcare System

Source: Gallup Poll; Trust in Institutions 1975-2022

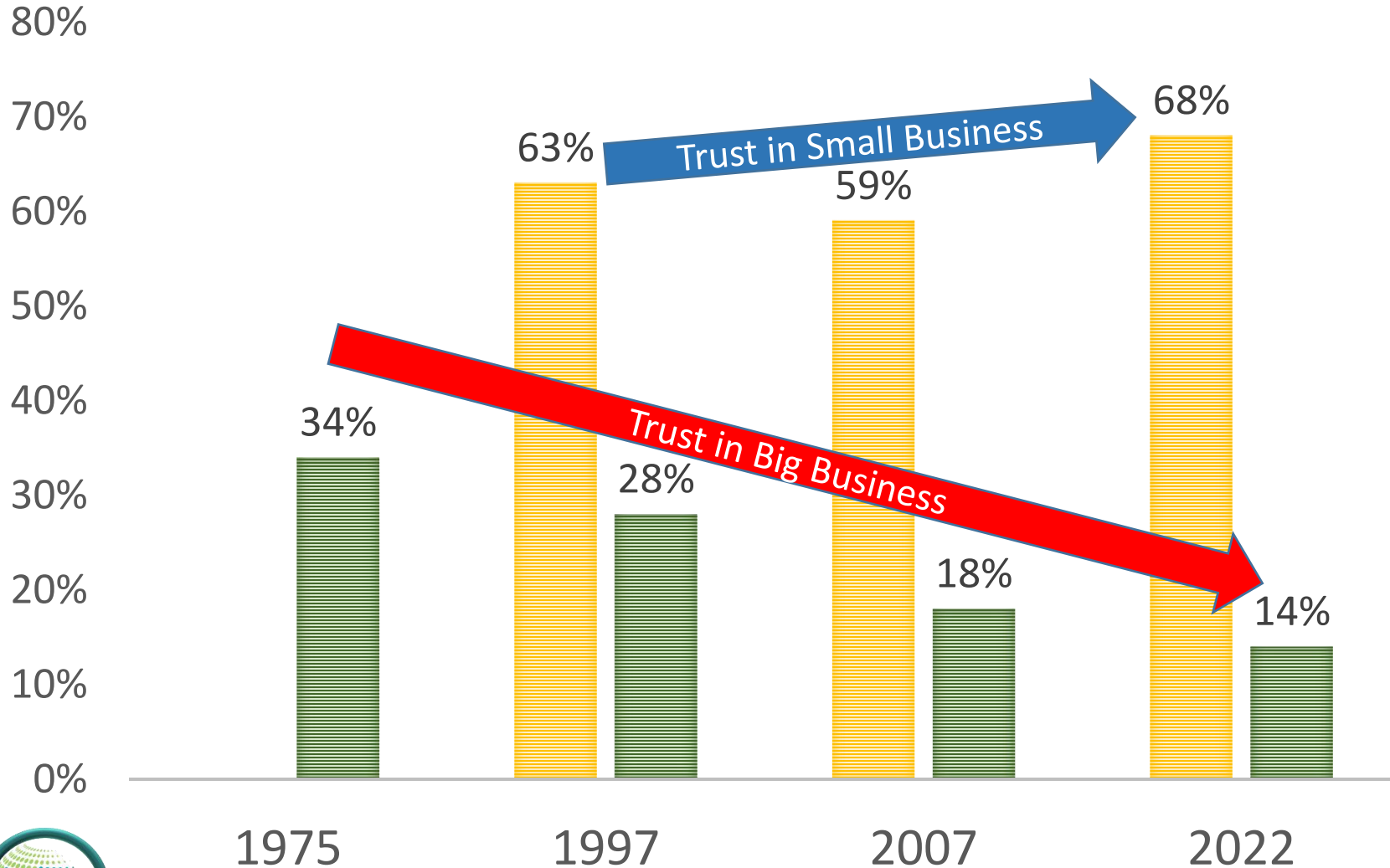
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We are FAILING in MEDICINE



TRUST IN BUSINESS

Trust in Small Business Trust in Big Business



Small Business is one of the few Trusted Institutions in America



Trust in Small Business is 5 times higher than Big Business

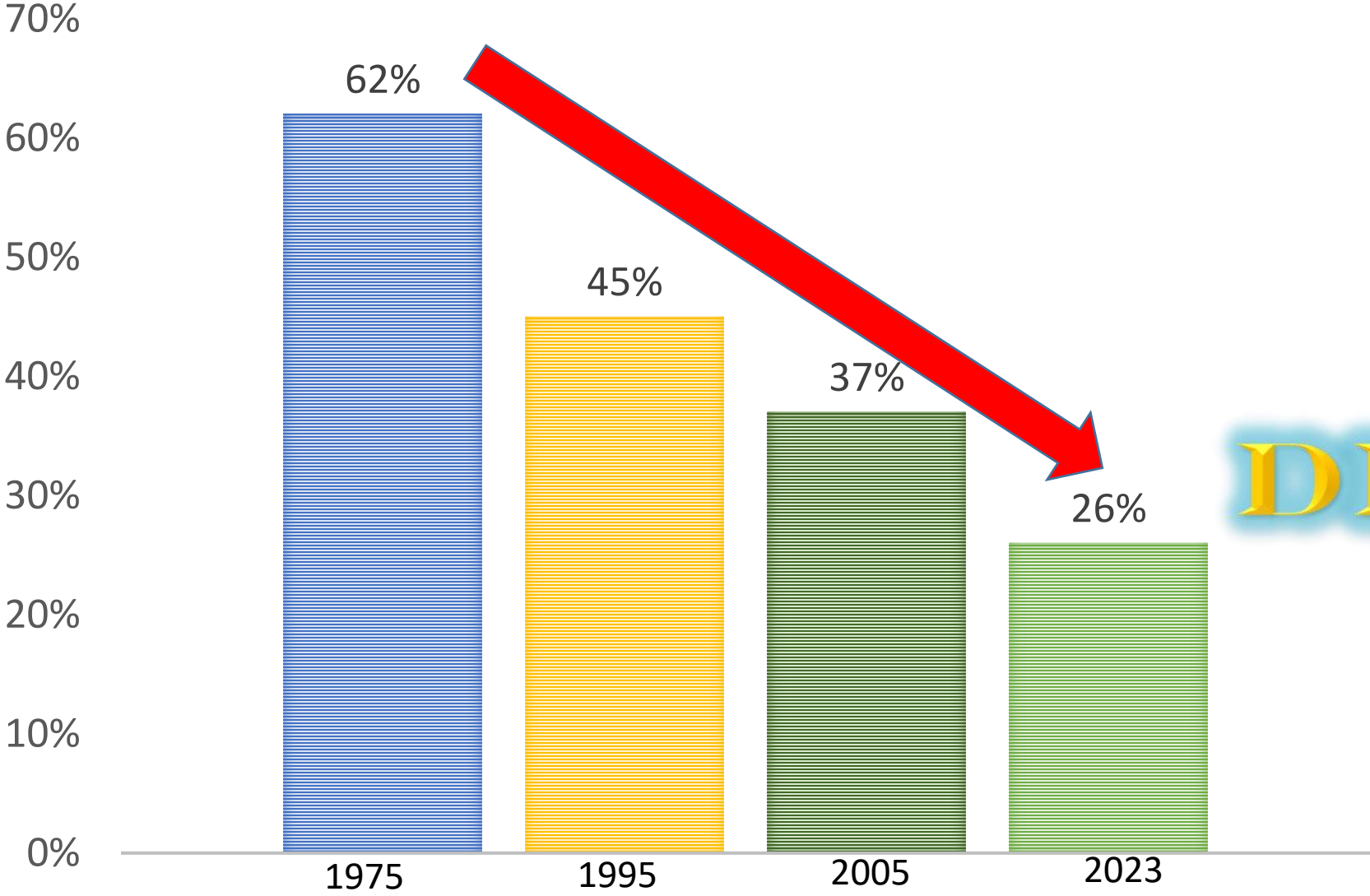


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TRUST IN PUBLIC EDUCATION



Trust in Public Schools

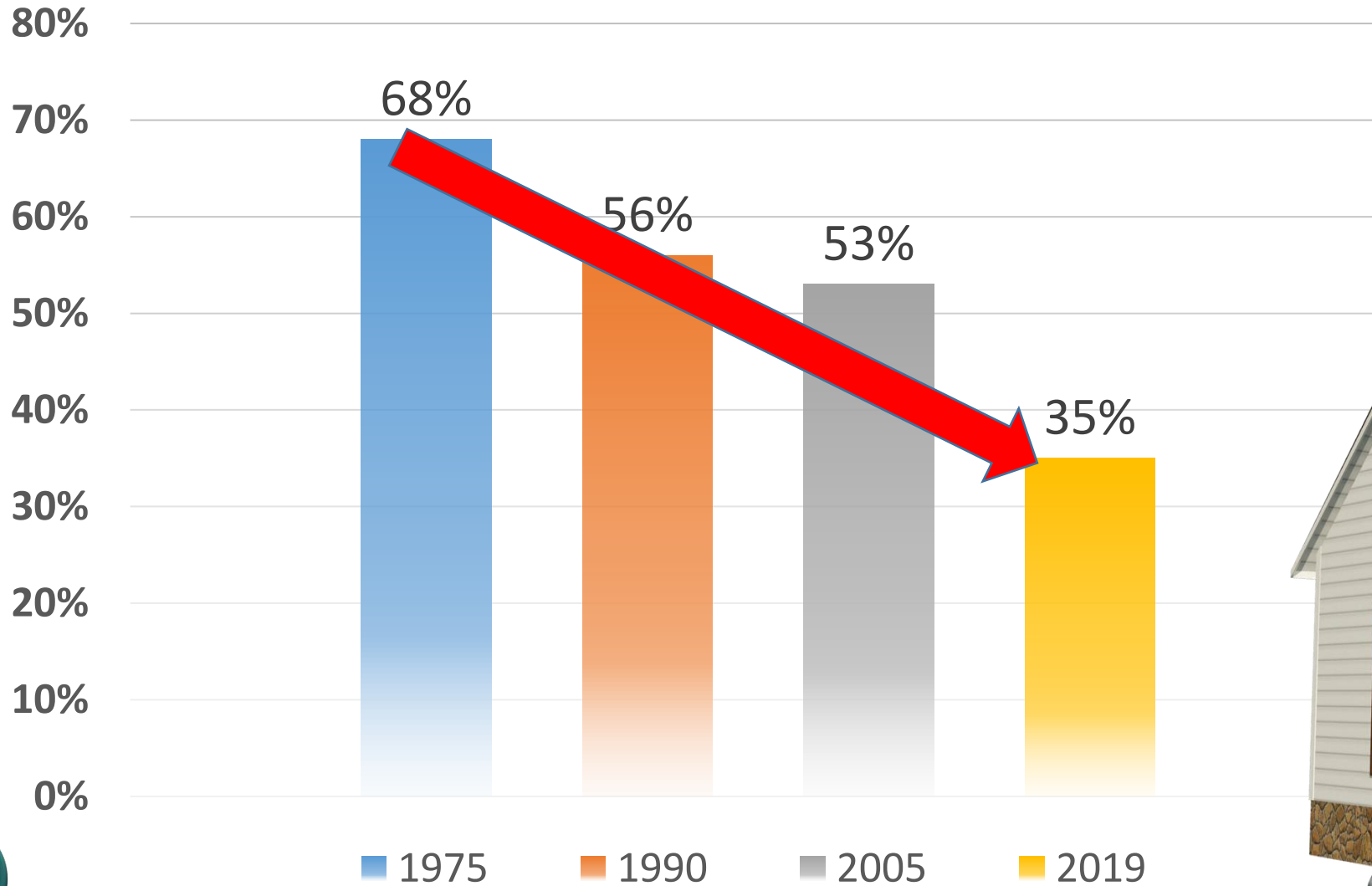
Source: Gallup Poll; Trust in Institutions 1975-2023

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We are FAILING OUR NEXT GENERATION



TRUST IN CHURCHES & ORGANIZED RELIGION – GALLUP POLL



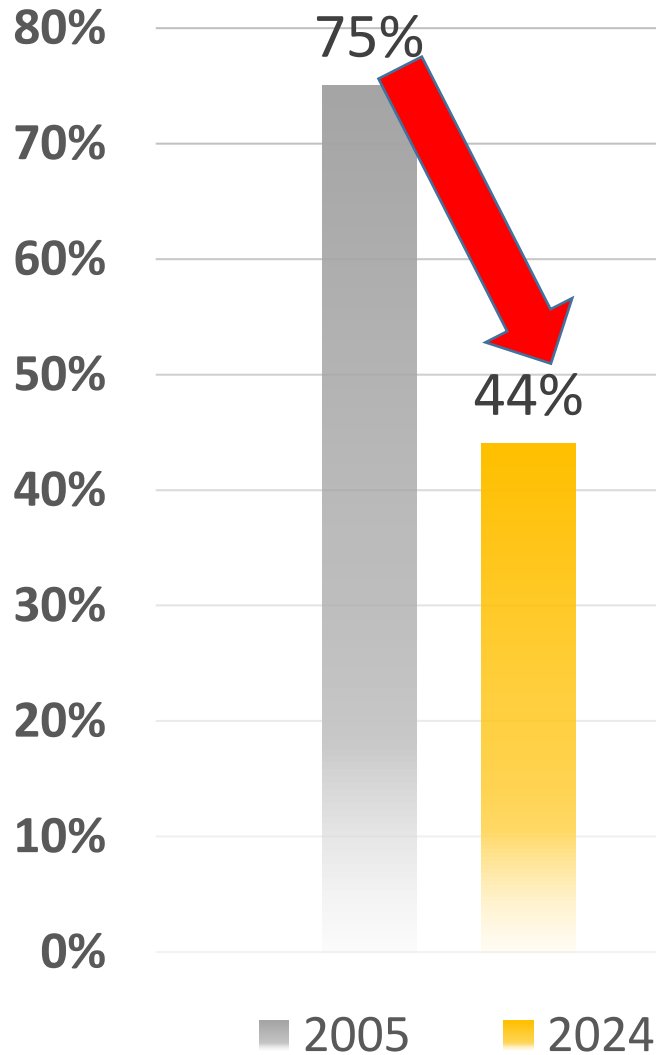
Source: Gallup Poll; Trust in Institutions 1975-2019

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**We are FAILING
OUR FAITH**



TRUST IN SUPREME COURT – GALLUP POLL



71% of Republicans
41% of independents
24% of Democrats
Trust the Court
to act in their best
interest

47-point gap between
Republicans &
Democrats
widest recorded

**We are FAILING IN OUR
SENSE OF FAIR PLAY**



Source: Gallup Poll; Trust in Institutions 2005-2024
Annenberg Public Policy Center
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Measure	Carter Era (~1977)	Bush Era (~2003)	Obama Era (~2012)	Today (2025)
Moderates in Congress (overall)	~30%	~8%	~5%	~3–4% (estimated)
Strong Conservatives or Liberals	~27%	~57%	~75%+	~90%+
Cross-party Ideological overlap	Significant	Shrinking	Near zero	Zero
GOP Moderates (Senate)	~40% (early 1990s)	—	~10%	~5% or fewer
Dem Moderates (House)	~35%	—	~12%	~8–10%

Moderates were the Buffers, the Bridge Builders, the Problem Solvers, the Trusted Agents of the Public

Sources:

<https://cnsmaryland.org/2025/10/21/congress-disagreeing-on-funding-isnt-new-but-statistically-its-members-disagree-more-than-ever> https://voteview.com/articles/party_polarization
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/655190/political-parties-historically-polarized-ideologically.aspx> https://lawler.house.gov/uploadedfiles/118th_highlights_final_03_24_2025.pdf

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TRUST DETERMINES THE COURSE OF HISTORY, THE DESTINIES OF NATIONS, AND THE FATE OF PEOPLE



-- Paul R. Lawrence, Professor,
Organization Behavior, Harvard Business School

DISTRUST
Achilles Heel
of
**American
Civilization**





Fear thy Neighbor,
Distrust thy Leaders,
Disavow thy Faith,
Divide thy Allegiance

*Reap the Storms
of Torment Today
and its Terrors Tomorrow*

Part 4. Polarization: What DOES NOT WORK

Facts?

Logic?

Ridicule?

Arguing?

Debate?

Calls for Civility?



Failed Strategy	Why It Fails	Missing Precondition
Debate & Argument	Hardens Positions, Triggers Ego Defense & Increases FEAR	No Trust Building, No Ψ Safety
Fact-Checking	Bypasses Emotional Root, Activates Identity Polarization	Anger Release Skipped
Raw Exposure to Opposing Views	Activates Dormant Tribal Identity	No Relational Trust Built
Social Media Engagement	Algorithmically Rewards Outrage	Structural Incentives Unreformed
Top-Down Civility Calls	Superficial, Not Relational	No Deep Norm-building
Talking about Disagreements	Triggers Defensiveness	No Curiosity Or Paradox Framing
Common-Enemy Identity Framing	Embeds The Us-vs-them Structure	Spiritual Connection & Dialogue Impossible



Part 5 – What We Can Do about Polarization

STEPS--Your everyday role as leaders

- 1. Release the Anger to Access the Dream**
- 2. Listening & Creative Inquiry**
- 3. Build Trust**
- 4. From Polarization to Paradox to Problem Solving**





Over-Archiving Principle

**People Support
What They Help Create**



Step 1. Understand the Emotional Source of Anger

Anger Volcano

Understand what boils under the surface

STRESS

DISTRUST

DEPRESSION

FRUSTRATION

VICTIMIZATION

HELPLESSNESS

UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS

GRIEVING & LOSS

LOSS OF CONTROL

DISAPPOINTMENT

FEAR & DANGER

INSECURITY

BETRAYAL

HURT

GUILT

ANXIETY

AMBIGUITY

UNCERTAINTY

MIXED MESSAGES

BROKEN PROMISES

React Not to Anger, but Respond to its Source



Step 2. Listen & Find Creative Insights

Ask a Diverse Group of People A Lot of Insightful Questions → Creates New Insights

- Ask: “Why is this important?” five levels down
- Start Conversations with a question
- Answer questions with more insightful questions
- Ask fundamental (dumb) questions at least once every meeting
- Begin a recommendation or suggestion with a question
- Create a high-order question that seeks meaning and purpose to your work

Types of Questions:

- ◆ Creative Possibility
what’s the possibility of?
Is there an analogy that.....?
- ◆ Root Cause
why, why, why?
- ◆ Multi-Dimensional Interrogatory
who, what, where, when, why, how?
- ◆ Action
Will you do?
Can you get?
How can we make it happen?



Refrain from Judgement



- You are not the Judge in a court of law. You are not trying to win an argument or debate.
- You are attempting to learn something, to discover, to create, to enable the other person to create.
- Be open to new ideas and the insights of others. Build on their ideas.
- If you are flexible, the chances are the other side will start to flex, but it may take some time.

Disagree or Diffagree?

As soon as you get in an Ego Battle, what happens?

DISAGREEMENT	DIFFAGREEMENT
"I Disagree with you"	"I'd like to propose a different point of view"
1) YOU ARE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stupid • Wrong • Bad • Foolish • Use Poor Judgement • Misinformed 	1) I HAVE ANOTHER: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perspective • Frame of Reference • Set of Priorities • Dimension • Point of View • Piece of Information
2) I AM: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smarter, more intelligent • Brighter • Have more Experience • More Important • More Informed 	2) I SEE YOUR POINT OF VIEW, BUT THERE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are paradoxes here • Are other considerations • Are many issues yet to resolve • Are unexplained dichotomies • Are further questions to address
"You" words	"Engagement" words
EGO SPEAKING	SPIRIT ("Heart of the Mind") SPEAKING
Destroy further partnership and co-creation	Create further dialogue and joint solutions



Step 3:



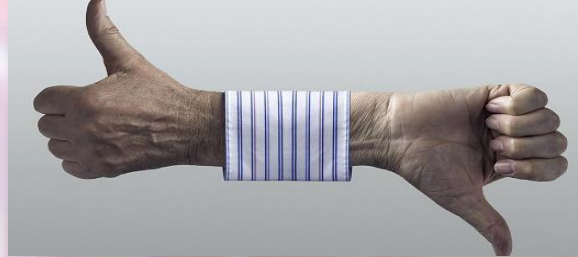
THREE BASIC ARCHETYPES OF CULTURE, LEADERSHIP, HUMAN BEHAVIOR & ECONOMICS

Adversarial



- Always Take Advantage
- Manipulation, Distrust
- Win-Lose, Dog Eat Dog
- Survival of Fittest
- Might makes Right
- My Way or the Highway
- He who has the gold, RULES!

Transactional



- Everything's a "Deal"
- Hierarchical Power
- Buy Low - Sell High
- Almighty Self Interest
- Tactical Transactions
- Price Price Price
- Positional Power

Collaborative



- Teamwork & Trust
- Seek Synergy by integration
- Work Ethic, Integrity
- Long-Term, Strategic View
- Value is far more than Price
- Cherish Differences as innovation engine
- Mutual Benefit

MUTUAL TRUST

*Best
Practice*



EIGHT TRUST PRINCIPLES

- 1. F**airness & Reciprocity
- 2. A**ccountability & Integrity
- 3. R**espect & Empathy
- 4. T**ruthfulness, Courage
- 5. H**onourable Purpose
- 6. E**thics & Excellence
- 7. S**afety & Security
- 8. T**ransparency & Openness



CREATING COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

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PROPRIETARY & CONFIDENTIAL



TRUST IS THE KEY ENABLER

Paul Zak's team found that compared with employees at low-trust organizations, the high-trust folks had

- 106% more energy
- 76% more engaged at work
- 50% more productive
- 88% more said they would recommend their company to family and friends as a place to work.

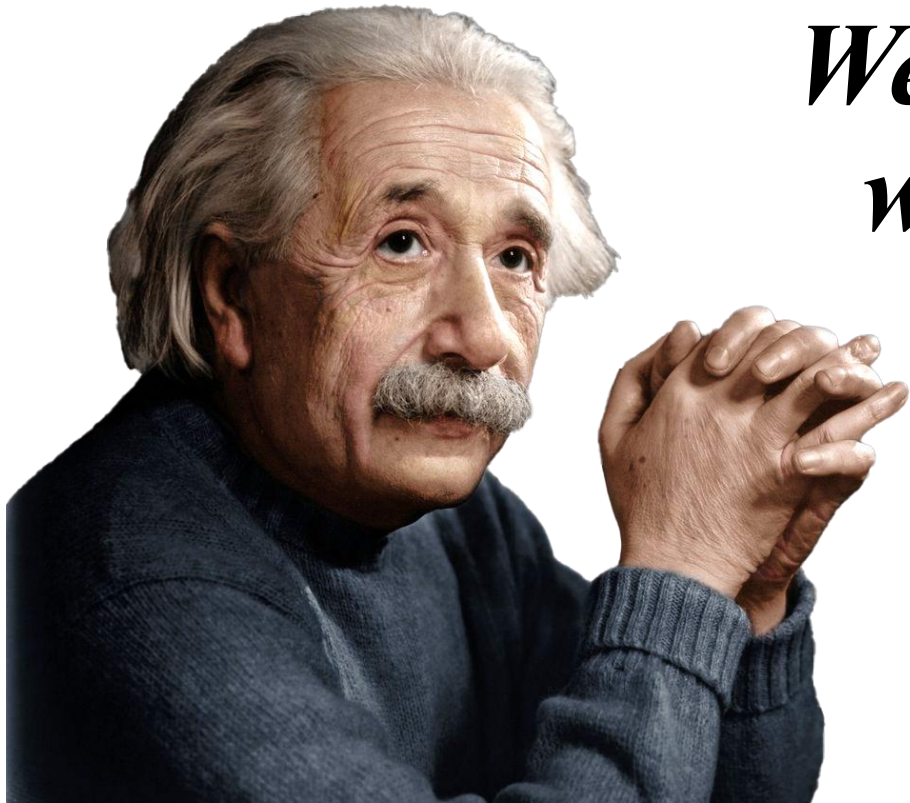
- 60% more job enjoyment
- 70% more aligned with their companies' purpose
- 66% closer to their colleagues.
- 11% more empathy for their workmates,
- 40% less burnout from their work
- 41% .greater sense of accomplishment,
- Source: Paul Zak & Rebecca Johanssen, **The Neuroscience of Organizational Trust and Business 2021**



Step 4 – from Polarization to Paradox to Paradigm Shifting

Don't Be Trapped in a Rear View Mirror

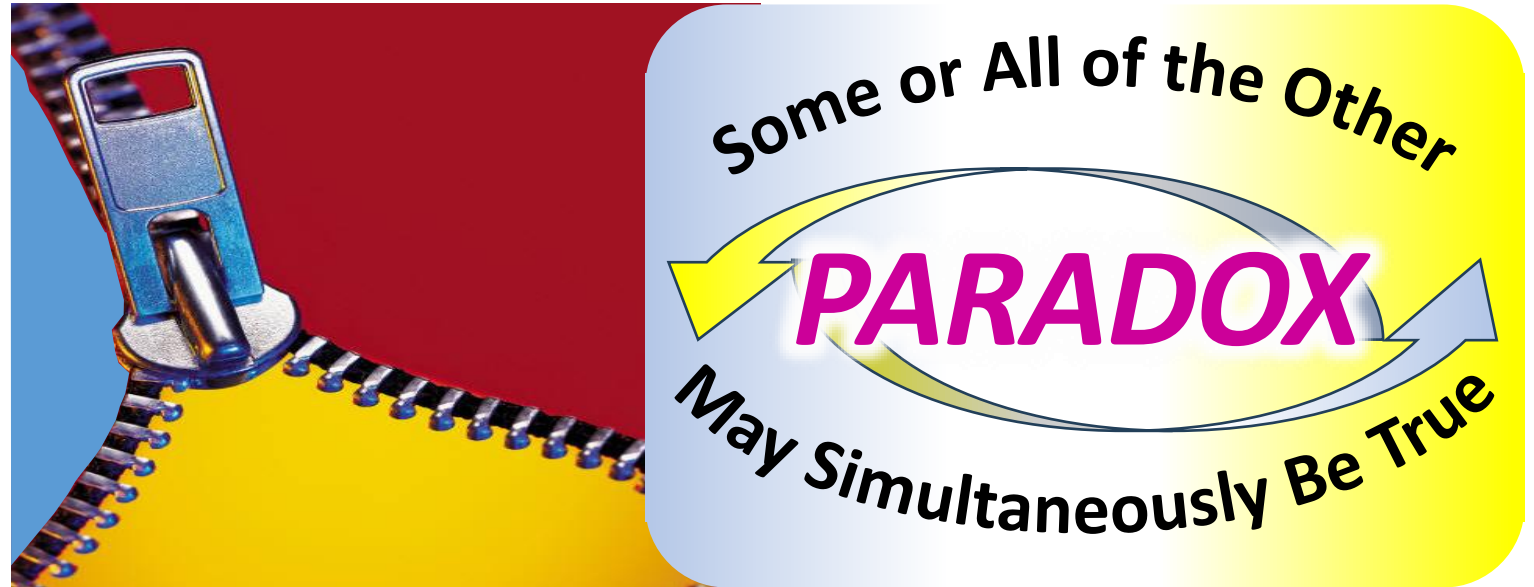
*We cannot solve today's problems
with the same level of thinking
that created the problem*



From Polarization to Paradox

Find Common Ground of Understanding

- Common Objectives
- Common Values
- Common Experiences
- Common Heritage
- Common Community
- Common Interests
- Common Vision
- Common Anguish
- Common Desires



Learn about people, seek to understand what we have that's common, unifying, and worthy of grace



Cherish Differences

***Differentials in Thinking
are the Inner Source of
Innovation***



Without Differences in Thinking, there is no “Dynamic Tension” that can result in Innovative Problem Solving and Paradigm Shifting – provided people trust each other to do what’s best for the nation





RUSHMORE STRATEGY

**America's
Biggest
Deficit**

**Leadership
& Trust
Deficit**

- ***Unite*** -- Not Divide
- ***Inspire*** -- Not Open Fire
- ***Elevate*** -- Not Denigrate
- ***Embrace*** -- Not Disgrace
- ***Enlighten*** -- Not Frighten
- ***Enthuse*** -- Not Confuse
- ***Engage*** -- Not Enrage





**We can destroy ourselves
just as quickly by Cynicism
as by Bombs**

Open Discussion

What's Important?

What's Missing?

What Shifts in Thinking?

What's Possible?

What Actions are Required?

What Must be Done Differently?

Counter-Points?

Key Take-Aways?

